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CIA and Iran:

Intelligence Test

TO THE secretary of state, the assistant for national security and the director of central intelligence, the President of the United States has passed the word: The quality of political intelligence we get from abroad is unsatisfactory.

The President, in his handwritten memorandum, released late last week to the media, was speaking generally. But most of all he was "dissatisfied," to use his own word, with recent reports on Iran. He had been told everything was fine in Iran; the shah, an invaluable U.S. ally, was in no danger. Then the riots and strikes erupted. The Peacock Throne began to totter.

Why didn't someone tell me? Such was Carter's acrid complaint.

Why indeed didn't someone tell him? There may well be more than one reason, but the paramount reason is that in the past few years, the eyes of our intelligence agents have been dimmed, their ears stopped up, their tongues made fuzzy.

Intelligence? Who needs intelligence? Who needs spies, with their penchant for secrecy, their disregard for the constitutional niceties?

The questions may sound absurd enough; and yet, in one form or another, they have flitted through the minds of countless Americans over the past few years. The Great CIA Flap of 1975-76, initiated by the media, pursued by the politicians, served to persuade many that the CIA (like the FBI) was as much threat to American Liberties as guardian thereof.

We were told of clandestine operations, of mail openings, of

manipulation of journalists and businessmen — enterprises that, ripped from context, made the CIA sound like some sinister capitalistic counterpart of the Soviet KGB.

Amid these thunderings, the morale of the CIA plummeted like a failed parachute. The men out in the field had scarcely to be convinced the American people had lost confidence in them. They had only to read the papers.

What kind of work can be expected of a demoralized intelligence agency? Just about the kind that has stirred the President to anger and will surely provoke him again unless something is done to persuade the CIA that we, the people, still believe in its mission.

That is no easy achievement to arrange. The President's own CIA director, Adm. Turner, is likely as responsible as anyone for the agency's condition, having heavy-handedly tried to clean house when he took over. Would anything be wrong with letting a professional spy, for a welcome change, command our other spies?

It is no frivolous point. After all, whom did the White House turn to for accurate reports on Iran after the CIA had flunked the intelligence test? To none other than the much-abused Richard Helms, a former CIA chief who was ambassador to Iran until recently. Spies, one readily learns, have their uses, however much they are out of favor when TV cameras roll and congressmen clear their throats to speak.